

Filed 9-15-34

DAVID A. SMART, ESQUIRE: The Reverse of the Alger Medal

Dave Smart, on the verge of forty, has lived a whole libraryfull of Alger yarns. Yet nobody could be a worse exemplar for eagereyed schoolboys earnestly seeking the golden means of getting ahead.

He is lazy. He stays up late, and mostly for no good purpose. He lies abed mornings. He is impulsive and prone to act on hunches. He is extravagant. He is fickle and moody and changeable. He puts too much trust in the wrong people and not half enough in the right ones. He is alternately over-enthusiastic and over-pessimistic, running hot and cold with a rapidity that is next to incredible. He is never content with a good thing, never satisfied, always seeking to gild the lily, always arguing with success. He is crusty and cantankerous on the surface and sticky with sentiment beneath (anybody knows that the reverse is better for business). He is devoid of patience. He makes no effort to cultivate people. He wants to hire half the men he meets. He prides himself on his judgment of character, which is terrible, being wrong at least four times out of five. He is always ready to believe that something he hasn't tried is better than anything he has. He refuses to believe the experts in any line, yet he will always listen to anybody else. He is too quick to hire people and too slow to fire them. He doesn't know how to relax. He sleeps fitfully and has sick headaches. He drinks coffee six to ten times a day. He takes no exercise. He is restless and hard to amuse. He is vain and yet he dodges the limelight, keeping in the background while somebody else takes the bows. His career to date has been one long succession of doing, in the eyes of all who watched him, the wrong thing at the wrong time.

And yet today he has the heads of old-line publishing businesses asking him how he figured out the answers. He has, in ESQUIRE, one of the most valuable publication properties of the time (at least, his majority interest is so large as to make his partners tantamount to being his employees). He has a string of trade publications which have enjoyed a success without precedent in their respective fields.



He has built an organization from nineteen people in 1929 to more than two hundred and fifty people today. He has not guessed wrong in a single venture since 1929 (he made plenty of wrong guesses before that but his diarrhea of ideas was always so strong that the law of averages protected him and his right ideas always paid off for a dozen wrong ones. He has had a dozen offers for his publication properties. One of them included retaining his services at a mere two grand per week. He has seen himself or his handiwork lauded in print a thousand times in the last two years. But there isn't a shred of complacency in his make-up. He is never satisfied.

Summer before last, during the pregnancy of ESQUIRE, he was particularly restless and dissatisfied, even for him. He didn't like ESQUIRE. It wasn't good enough to suit him. Twice he held up publication of the initial issue. Each time he enlarged the scope of the magazine; put in more color pages; added new features. Twice the editor had to get off his haunches and scurry for more material. Finally, when the state of advance publicity and promotion had made further postponement impossible, he okayed ESQUIRE's first issue simply because there was nothing else he could do. He still didn't like it. The editor had to spend hours each day selling him on the magazine while the first issue was on the press. He still didn't like it. When the reception of the first issue made the success of ESQUIRE a foregone conclusion, when the rest of the organization had their noses buried deep in glowing press notices and a deluge of excited and exciting fan mail, he alone was still dissatisfied. He enlarged it one-third in size, for the second issue, and switched it from a quarterly to a monthly basis. ( This in the face of professional and expert advice that the magazine was already "too big"). He made a dozen experiments a day with details of format; a dozen suggestions daily for details of content. He would be the first to say that half of them were lousy. But the point is that out of them came steadily mounting sales and the avoidance of what was so freely predicted for ESQUIRE: a success of the "flash-in-the-pan" variety. The best guarantee for



the enduring success of all the Smart publications, (including the half-dozen that have yet to spring full-armed from his head) is the fact that it is ten times as easy to please the public as it is to please Dave Smart.

He has not aged perceptibly in the past ten years. He has crinkly blond hair and a slim college-boyish figure. He resembles his father, who at seventy looks acts talks and dresses like a man of fifty, and he probably will continue to resemble him in this perennial youthfulness. If he wanted to cheat about his age (he will be forty in October) he could probably get by as being in his middle thirties for the next ten years. Still, in the grip of a headache, he sometimes looks older than God. He has done everything about the headaches. Everything but the obvious (and probably impossible) thing, which would be to eat sleep and rest and relax like a normal person.

He has the appetite of a sick sparrow. He is super-finicky about food. It is hard to understand how he lived through the war. Not the bullets -- the army grub.

He enlisted in June of '17 and saw service in all the major engagements in which American troops participated. Ultra-practical in war as in everything else, he kept as his constant aim neither promotion nor the acquisition of souvenirs -- simply emergence with a whole skin. He won a citation not because he was out for one but because he was virtually put on the spot by an officer who had a grudge against him, and merely managed, through cool-headedness, to turn up again like the bad penny.

He is a bad fit when you try to cast him in the proverbial Rags to Riches pattern. He was born in Omaha, Nebraska (but has lived in Chicago since the age of eight), one of a family of five children who had to be fed and clothed and housed on never more than \$12 a week. And yet none of them ever went ragged. Old family group pictures show them to have been a most presentably dressed bunch of kids. A genius for management runs in the family.



He worked in a candy store when he was ten, in a hat store when he was twelve. He watched the way the clerks snapped the hats out at arm's length, to set a snappy crease in the fedoras, and soon he could snap a hat onto a surprised customer's head with the best of them. He was, in fact, top "man" on the floor. What he hadn't realized when he took the job was that it was a selling-out sale, and that his super-salesmanship simply hastened the day when the job would be over.

Next he went, on sheer bluff, into a stenographer's job on a Chicago newspaper. He knew no stenography, but neither did the boss to whom he was assigned -- a red-necked Irishman who hemmed and hawed painfully when it came time to give dictation. "Listen, mister," said the stenogin-insee-pants, "It looks to me like you're not so experienced in this part of the work as you might be. I'll be glad to help you out. Why don't you just give me the rough idea of what you want to say and I'll make it sound nice." The sweating boss was deeply appreciative and thus, without benefit of shorthand, was a stenographer born.

It was the classified ad department, and soon he asked for a chance to be allowed to bring in ads. Permission was given and within a week he sold the first full-page purchase of want-ad space ever made. It was a simple matter to keep his volume-user of want-ad space sold on the idea and, thus, by working one day a week, make \$95 a week in commission. The jealousy of the regular sluggers who were out ringing doorbells every day selling six and eight line ads was something epic, and soon the department politics brought about his "promotion," as a reward for distinguished service, to a regular job at a straight salary of \$28.50 a week! He quit in disgust. Nowadays, they are prone to brag about him on that paper as one of their boys who made good.

From then on he would never work for a salary. It was commission or nothing. He held a succession of selling jobs and he was never out of <sup>the</sup> money. He didn't work very hard because he didn't have to. "The competition wasn't so tough." (That is still, in the present tense, one of his favorite expressions.) He sold posters, for



a while, in Kansas City. It was the only time, except for a few months after the war when he was in the commodity business in Michigan, that he ever worked away from his home town. He went into the war without a dime. He had never saved his money. It was too easy to make more. He came out of the war in the same financial condition in which he entered it.

Getting home in '19, he got into the commodity business on what you might call a broken and knotted shoestring. By fall he had \$50,000. By the following summer he had a quarter of a million on paper. By the beginning of '21 it had shrunk to a hundred thousand <sup>and</sup> before he could get out it was thirty thousand.

He had wanted, always, to get his mother a towncar and chauffeur. He thought he was pretty lucky to have enough left for that. He got another selling job. The product was a series of safety posters. They sold like hotcakes, at a marvelous markup. He was making a lot of money but he wasn't satisfied. He wasn't thinking so much of the amount he was making for himself as of the amount he must be making for his boss. He decided to get off on his own. He changed the idea from safety to thrift (of all things), raised the quality by 100% and the price by 50%, and began to clean up. He sold them, in yearly supplies, to banks. Soon he had men working for him. Some of them gypped him blind (the judge of character!), some of them quit to go into competition with him (but most of them came back broke, because they hadn't his astuteness to double the quality without doubling the price--his favorite formula now as then) and some of them cleared out owing him money. They still do. At that, although he has often had his feeding hand bitten, he has never taken a dollar loss on anyone who ever worked for him!

He has been an easy mark for a hard-luck story all his life. He could retire for life on what is owed him by glib-talkers who are still (and some of them pretty prominently) in circulation. It is hardly to be hoped that any of them will read this. Although he was a salesman himself, he is easy to sell. He rises to the glitter of a new idea like a muskie to a spoon. But he's hell to keep hooked.



He sails for new ideas and new people like a clipper ship, but he's apt to be back home in port very soon. Through his office has passed a big parade of razzle-dazzle boys who have talked themselves both into and out of his confidence. He is never satisfied with his <sup>own</sup>/~~work~~— hence seldom with that of others. He will treat a likely office boy like a brother, and an unproductive executive like the plague.

He goes into things like a Mack truck into a fruit stand. Two years ago he became a patron of the arts. He went to Europe to buy paintings and all his friends thought he would ~~get~~ <sup>be</sup> stung. He didn't know a painting from a sunset. He bought Renoirs, Pissarros, Dufys, Chagalls and Soutines by the square yard. He came back to make his offices look like a gallery. He talked to directors and curates of museums and institutes and they thought he was an expert, and the funny part is that by that time he was. His interest didn't last. With the advent of ESQUIRE, the only art he has bought has been the kind that carries gag-lines at the bottom. The paintings are all in storage. Next year he'll have some new enthusiasm -- say book-collecting. But although he has probably forgotten how many paintings he owns, and he hasn't looked at them for months, they have tripled in value since he brought them home! Things don't interest him for long, but while they do he handles them with the well-known Midas touch.

How can you explain a guy like that in terms of the simple virgues that all the success stories have led us to expect? Put him down, I guess, as the exception that proves the rule. And if there must be a reduction to terms of a formula, this is probably as good as any:

In a time when the trend was to see how cheaply things could be made and sold, he had the perverseness to try the opposite, and, in taking the opposite direction from that of the crowd, he rightly guessed that the traffic would be pretty light. How else can you explain a fellow who sells almost two hundred thousand 50¢ magazines per month, when the experts told him that twenty-five thousand would be the



newsstand saturation point? How else, in fact, can you explain his launching a 50¢ magazine at all, when all the experts could have told him that the nickel and dime magazines were having a headache? Still, to him that might not be so terrifying. He can tell the experts about headaches.

--- Arnold Gingrich

.....